

"A Program of Complete Disorder": The Black Iconoclasm Within Fanonian Thought

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ABSTRACT This essay examines the scholarship of revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon and the debate surrounding his conception of decolonization and "new humanism." Across a multitude of fields, Black and cultural studies among them, Fanon has been heralded as an iconic thinker who offers us a path toward an alternative humanity. Working against the grain of this popular form of Fanonism, I suggest that there is a Black iconoclasm—a deep desire to unsettle the very rendering of a systematic path toward decolonization—that pervades Fanonian thought. Accordingly, the essay examines and unsettles various forms of Fanonism by suggesting that their teleological narratives of redemption ultimately end up serving anti-Fanonian pursuits. Through an extended meditation on Fanon's claim that decolonization is "a program of complete disorder," I explore what it might mean to embrace a Black iconoclastic approach to Fanon and the pursuit of Black liberation.

KEYWORDS Black studies, cultural studies, decolonial, Frantz Fanon, iconography, new humanism

In considering the legacy and impact of Frantz Fanon, cultural theorist Stuart Hall once remarked that *The Wretched of the Earth* is "the Bible of the decolonization movement."¹ On one hand, Hall's statement points to the fact that Fanon's corpus speaks to questions about one's cosmology and the struggle against the evils of anti-Black colonialism. On the other hand, we might ask if this labeling of Fanon's book as "the Bible" speaks to the attempt to map out a vision of the world beyond this one. This second aspect of Hall's statement might thus be read as risking the replication of anti-Fanonian pursuits: namely, the pursuit of a teleological vision of Black liberation which breeds formulaic blueprints rather than a commitment to chaotic invention. Whereas one might argue that Fanon's scholarship offers us a vision of a world cleansed of colonialism, this essay considers elements of Fanon's scholarship that indicate a desire to unsettle the very formation of a "Bible of decolonization" in favor of theorizing decolonization as "a program of complete disorder."²

There have been multiple attempts to map the various phases and interpretations of Fanonism, each of them implicitly claiming the superiority of their own interpretations. There are too many Fanonisms to fully encapsulate within the scope of this essay; some might prefer to base their interpretations on Cedric Robinson's warnings about appropriations of Fanon's corpus or Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White's edited collection, *Fanon: A Critical Reader*.³ Others might prefer Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s "critical Fanonism" or Nigel C. Gibson's "authentic Fanon."⁴ In lieu of a chronological excavation of these different Fanonisms, this essay considers what Black and ethnic studies scholar Reiland Rabaka's calls the five major interlocking forms of Fanonism within contemporary scholarship.⁵ "Antiracist Fanonism" emphasizes Fanon's

existential phenomenology of race and his contributions to critical race theory. "Decolonialist Fanonism," emphasizes Fanon's thoughts on revolutionary violence and his divergence from the cultural nationalism and vanguardism of Césaire. "Marxist Fanonism" emphasizes Fanon's expansion of Marxist study of the political economy to more fully consider the implications of racialized colonialism. "Feminist Fanonism" emphasizes the essential, yet oftentimes contradictory, contributions Fanon makes to feminism, womanism, and women's studies. "Revolutionary humanist Fanonism," which Rabaka most closely aligns with, emphasizes an examination of Fanon's concept of "new humanism" in order to explicate what it is and the viable solutions it might offer toward the struggle for decolonization. Building on Gordon and Rabaka, I am concerned with the "disciplinary decadence" which refers to the process of critical decay within a discipline or a field of thought emerging within debates about Fanon.⁶ Disciplinary decadence reveals how the search for iconic interpretations of Fanon potentially stifles more nuanced and open conversations about his corpus. Rather than allowing arbitrary disciplinary rules and theoretical customs to render differing interpretations null and void in service of being right, what if we engaged in a critical commitment to challenging all attempts to produce an iconic narrative of redemption from a Fanonian perspective? How do we do the critical work of self-reflection to consider how we, as interdisciplinary scholars engaging Fanon, might produce our own teleological narratives?

This question about Fanon and disciplinary decadence has particular importance for cultural studies. Indeed, questions about the potentially dangerous appropriations of Fanon's scholarship raised by Cedric Robinson in 1993 have been a central focus of cultural studies scholars such as Anthony Alessandrini, Rey Chow, E. San Juan Jr., Homi K. Bhabha, and Gibson, who explore Fanon's importance to thinking about cultural identification, nationalism, and post-structuralist theory.⁷ Confirming Fanon's importance to the Birmingham school, Hall went as far to claim that Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* is "one of the most startling, staggering, important books in this field [of cultural studies]" because it opens up a discussion about the lived experience of culture, the way colonizers attempt to control difference, and how one might anticipate and/or inspire transformations in culture.⁸ Engaging with these thinkers, I ask, how might Fanon's theory of decolonization as a "program of complete disorder" help us interrogate and dismantle anti-Black colonial culture? How does Fanon help us pursue something beyond this world? Whereas many Black and cultural studies scholars are interested in performances of culture and agency that offer a space of life in the midst of Black abjection, afropessimism via Fanon reminds us of the "species division" between white and Black that structures the whole of those interactions.⁹ As Wilderson reminds us, there is no "redemption" to be had in an anti-Black world.¹⁰ It is important to note that Fanon's program of complete disorder is aimed at shattering not simply the anti-Black cosmos but also rigid visions of Black revolution. Perhaps the most famous example of this fact is Fanon's shattering of Aimé Césaire's iconic *Negritude*. While they were indeed friends and interlocutors, Fanon became increasingly frustrated with Césaire's investment in cultural nationalism and vanguardism.¹¹ For Fanon, this political model of Black revolution simply erected a new iconic vision of Black culture that was rooted in a desire to prove to the white world that Black people are civilized. Beyond that, Fanon was concerned that Césaire's embracement of vanguardism would reproduce elitist divisions between charismatic leaders and the people which would come at the expense of the masses; thus, even if the colonized might achieve political and economic independence from the colonizer through the embracement of *Negritude*, the psychological internalization of white colonial values would still remain.¹²

While different in content, Fanon believed that Césaire's *Negritude* still shared in a limited *form* of iconography that stifles true radical invention in favor of a redemptive telos. Fanon's criticism of Césaire's *Negritude* is mirrored by other debates in cultural studies about the interlocking relationship between acts of icon destruction and icon creation. A notable example might be found in cultural and religious studies scholar Michael Taussig's "Iconoclasm Dictionary," which examines how the destruction of one icon might unintentionally produce a new icon of worship.¹³ This, I argue, is not dissimilar from Fanon's criticisms of Césaire; while Césaire was attempting to smash the icon of Western Man, this Black iconoclastic spirit was undercut by the desire to establish a counter-icon worthy of veneration in the form of *Negritude*. Moreover, it is not dissimilar from the debates happening about Fanon's corpus and the rush by some scholars to crown their work the proper and authentic reading of these Biblical Fanonian texts. While these scholars might intend to rescue Fanon from dangerous appropriations, we might ask whether they risk pursuing an anti-Fanonian agenda by converting Fanon's theory of decolonization into a systematic program that offers a blueprint to an alternative humanity. It is this dangerous slippage between iconoclasm and icon creation that leads Taussig to question whether iconoclasm has become a dated project, since "you smash [the icons] and—lo and behold!—they have become icons [yet again]."¹⁴ Yet, as I demonstrate throughout this essay, not all iconoclasm is created equal; while some forms of iconoclasm (e.g. Césaire's *Negritude*) might be enacted in service of a redemptive telos, I consider how Fanon's program of complete disorder might hold within it a kind of Black iconoclastic orientation that is necessarily anti-telos and ritually committed to the chaotic unsettling of the anti-Black world through the antagonism and refusal of its icons. It is within this chaos that we might be able to apprehend what Fanon means by invention.

This essay attunes scholars to the "Black iconoclasm" that resides in the thinking of Frantz Fanon and afropessimist theory.¹⁵ A Black iconoclastic interpretation of Fanon concurs with David Marriott that we cannot only reduce the Fanonian leap away from the anti-Black cosmos and subsequent space of invention to various humanisms.¹⁶ Instead, it requires a shattering of the icon of the human; it requires us to take a leap toward something that remains "radically unwritten."¹⁷ Drawing on afropessimist scholars Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, I argue that we might approach this attempt at invention through the demand for "the end of the world."¹⁸ One might argue that calling for the end of the world is a telos in of itself. However, the Black iconoclasm within Fanonian thought demonstrates an important distinction between demanding the end of the intolerable conditions of the anti-Black world and the attempt to map out a teleological understanding of the world that comes after. Moving beyond the diagnosis of the anti-Black world as unethical, my theory of Black iconoclasm pushes the reader to consider what it might mean to bring the afropessimist theory of ending the world into the realm of everyday practice. In this sense, this essay thinks about what it means to engage in a ritual orientation of chaos that is not governed by a rigid method and does not have a teleological vision of the world beyond this one. The question facing the reader is: what does it mean to commit oneself to the destruction of this anti-Black world, not through the replication of a rigid iconic model of Black resistance, but instead as a life-long, messy, non-linear, process that will inevitably be riddled with failures? How can we hold steadfast to this commitment despite new emerging icons that promise redemption?

In what follows, I engage the work of scholars such as Rabaka and Marriott who trace the various approaches to Fanon's corpus as it relates to Black and cultural studies. Then, I draw on Marriott and afropessimist scholars to challenge these dominant forms of Fanonism. In particular, I explore how the criticisms levied at afropessimism by scholars

who take up the “revolutionary humanist” form of Fanonism, such as Lewis Gordon, Greg Thomas, Achille Mbembe, and Annie Olaloku-Teriba, reproduce disciplinary decadence.¹⁹ Finally, I turn to an examination of the afropessimist turn in Fanonism through scholars such as Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, and Calvin Warren. I explore some of the differences between these theorists, including their respective theories of “afropessimism,” “black mysticism,” and “black nihilism” that emerge within this broader afropessimist turn.²⁰ I conclude with a consideration of how Black iconoclasm places the demand for the end of the world into the realm of everyday practice through an engagement with Black feminist scholar Christina Sharpe’s notion of “wake work.”²¹

Fanon as Icon: Cultural Studies & Popular Forms of Fanonism

There is a Black iconoclasm pervading Fanonian thought that challenges the cosmology of the anti-Black world. Cosmology (*κοσμολογία*) broadly refers to the study of (*λογία*) how one orders the world (*κόσμος*). While discussions of cosmology often times pertain to scientific and/or religious debates about the nature and origin of our universe, it can also broadly refer to how certain cultures create their own unique understandings of the world that subsequently structure their interactions. As it pertains to Fanon, my discussion of cosmology can be understood as a reference to the values of a white colonial world that have been violently imposed upon Black and colonized people. As Black feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter explains, this cosmology is partially rooted in a colonial interpretation of Christianity that is taken up by conquistadors (e.g., Christopher Columbus) to argue that God has created the Earth “on behalf of” (*propter nos*) Western Man who is compelled to bring the rest of mankind into proper Christian life.²² Even as the explicit reliance on God has fallen to the wayside, secular Western culture continues to rely on a violent ordering of the world which privileges, in Fanonian terms, “white masks” over “Black skin” and “colonizer” over “colonized.” This anti-Black cosmos comes to be represented through a complex system of iconography (*εικονογραφία*) which refers to the writing and/or representation (*γραφία*) of an image (*εἰκῶν*) that either already resembles *our* likeness or we should strive to resemble. Of course, *our* likeness refers to the likeness of Western Man; thus, Black and colonized folk come to fetishize white skin, white colonial cultures, and white colonial languages, always attempting to bend and mold ourselves into nearly resembling what this anti-Black culture identifies as being of value. It is this internalization of a white concept of self that Fanon so rigorously attempts to shatter through his writing and clinical practice.

Fanon’s Black iconoclasm strikes at the heart of questions about cultural identification. For example, the scholars invested in the antiracist form of Fanonism are precisely interested in how Fanon speaks to the everyday psychological impact that white colonial iconography has on Black people. As Hortense Spillers argues, the Black thug, the Black mammy, the Black jezebel, and more, all act as symbols within this larger anti-Black cosmology that unconsciously function through even the most liberal and well-intentioned whites.²³ There is no better example of this than Jean-Paul Sartre, who, according to Rabaka, served as a source of disappointment for Fanon due to his attempt to make *Negritude* palatable to white audiences.²⁴ In doing so, Fanon argued that Sartre demonstrated how white people who reflect on the lived experience of Blackness can still themselves reproduce the iconography of the anti-Black cosmos. Rabaka also places Fanon in conversation with

Charles Mills, bell hooks, and James Baldwin, who have all explored what it might look like if Black people began to articulate their experiences with, and their anger toward, this white supremacist structure.²⁵ In this sense, debates surrounding Fanon's corpus highlight an attempt to shatter Black and colonized people's identification with white colonial culture in favor of inventing something new.

Similarly, the decolonialist form of Fanonism is concerned with Fanon's theory of racialized colonialism and his critique of cultural nationalism and vanguardism. Scholars such as Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Darrel Wanzer-Serrano are just two examples of decolonial scholars who engage Fanonian thought.²⁶ In Fanon, they find a thinker who articulates a struggle of the colonized against coloniality, the deep and lasting relationships and structures initiated by the original act of colonialism, which serves as the foundation of Western modernity. Additionally, they find in Fanon a call for the colonized to epistemically de-link themselves from colonial thought in favor of an alternative humanity built on decolonial love. Additionally, Fanon's critiques of the cultural nationalism and vanguardism of Césaire's *Negritude* are important for considering how the values of racialized colonialism can be internalized even when the colonized are able to claim political and economic independence. An important lesson can be gleaned here: just because you've posed a challenge to the cosmology of Western Man does not mean that you have escaped its grasp. Indeed, for Fanon, Césaire's *Negritude* is an example of how certain forms of iconoclasm can ultimately become thwarted in service of a redemptive telos rooted in the iconography of an anti-Black cosmos.

Bhabha exemplifies a postcolonialist reading of Fanon that is concerned with racialized colonialism on the level of everyday cultural identifications and interactions. In reading Fanon alongside Lacanian psychoanalysis, Bhabha finds that the power of Fanon lies in his ability to trace the cultural alienation of the colonized through everyday language, desires, and assumptions and to name this alienation as the center of how the Enlightenment category of "Man" and its "order of reality" is established.²⁷ In this order of reality, the colonized find themselves stuck between an identification with white colonial iconography and their desire to be liberated from its violence. Bhabha thus reads Fanon as similarly caught up in this kind of ambivalence regarding white colonial culture and even attempts to correct Fanon's engagements with Lacan through his own psychoanalytic thinking. A distinct, yet related, form of "critical Fanonism" espoused by Gates praises Bhabha for taking up Fanon alongside post-structuralist theory, referring to him as Fanon's "closest reader."²⁸ Interestingly, Gates does not attempt to offer one particular reading of Fanon but instead wrestles with scholars' various appropriations of Fanon as an exercise for thinking about contemporary colonial discourse theory.²⁹ Yet, both of these thinkers have been criticized for engaging Fanon in purely academic terms that divorces Fanon's politics and clinical practice from decolonial praxis.

Marxist Fanonism, exemplified by Robinson, Gibson, and San Juan, has serious criticisms of both Bhabha and Gates' respective interpretations of Fanon that strike at the heart of the disciplinary debates about whether an analysis of culture comes at the expense of an analysis of the political economy. Robinson argues that Gates and Bhabha's emphasis on poststructuralism and psychoanalysis stifles our ability to produce a broader theory of colonialism, recolonizing Fanon in service of petit-bourgeois academics who remain uncommitted to a material analysis of the political economy and the movement toward decolonization.³⁰ Similarly, Gibson argues that Bhabha mocks Fanon's new humanism and desire for total revolution as utopian which results in a "domesticated Fanon" who is not driven by the pursuit of liberation.³¹ San Juan explains that this reading of Fanon has

inspired “contemporary cultural studies [scholarship which] celebrates heterogeneity, flux, ambiguous hybrids, indeterminacies, accidents, and lacunae inhabiting bifurcated psyches and texts.”³² Here, we have a double-edged sword emerging; on one hand, one reading of Fanon could potentially engage in a kind of cultural nationalism and vanguardism that establishes a nostalgic Black past (*Negritude*) as a counter-icon worthy of veneration. On the other hand, we risk engaging in a kind of critical Fanonism that privileges an analysis of cultural hybridity and ambivalence that is divorced from an ethic of decolonization.

The feminist form of Fanonism is similarly invested in this debate about Fanon’s importance to the disciplines of cultural studies and gender studies. Feminist and cultural theorist Rey Chow argues that the cultural studies post-structuralist approach to Fanonism has accomplished a more nuanced engagement with the subject while at the same time risking a setback insofar as this work on the subject begins to downplay the role of “structural control—of law, sovereignty, and prohibition—that underlie the subject’s relation with the collective.”³³ Subsequently, Chow finds an engagement with Fanon fruitful for considering questions of community and admittance in context of race and sexuality. She asks, what does Fanon tell us about how the colonized might move beyond an identification with colonial culture, and what is the role of the woman of color in this pursuit? While other feminist scholars have critiqued Fanon as anti-feminist for his critiques of Martinican feminist Mayotte Capécia, Chow believes this to be too surface level of an engagement.³⁴ According to Chow, it is not that Fanon does not offer the woman of color any agency in his writing but rather that Fanon can only imagine her agency through her sexuality as an object of exchange. For Chow, Fanon only reads Black women like Capécia in context of their support for the wronged sovereign that is the Black man and the potential creation of a new community or their potential betrayal of the decolonial revolution in favor of admittance into the white world.³⁵ Yet, feminist scholars such as Sharpley-Whiting argue that Fanon’s criticism of Capécia is actually well-founded, and that many of the feminist defenses of Capécia refuse to hold her accountable for her blatant “blackfemmephobia.”³⁶ For Sharpley-Whiting, it is Capécia who is attempting to differentiate herself from other Black people, and Black women in particular through the privileging of her mixed-race status as a ticket of admittance into the white world. Indeed, this debate highlights how Fanon’s shattering of anti-Black colonial iconography might be thought of through the lens of gender and sexuality. How does Fanonian thought help us shatter icons of gender and a broader culture of blackfemmephobia? How does Fanon himself, and thinkers engaged with Fanon, risk investing in certain icons of gender that ultimately stifle radical invention?

The revolutionary humanist form of Fanonism, represented by scholars such as Gordon, Mbembe, Maldonado-Torres, Rabaka, and others, emphasizes Fanon’s concept of “new humanism” as the connective piece that catalyzes “antiracist, antisexist, anticolonialist, and anticapitalist revolution.”³⁷ For these scholars, Fanon’s scholarship speaks to the creation of an alternative insurgent humanity that runs counter to Western Man. Revolutionary humanist Fanonism is invested in an analysis of the lived experience of Blackness that is both accountable to feminist critiques of Fanonian thought and offers its own correctives to orthodox Marxism, neoliberal celebrations of cultural hybridity, petit-bourgeois critical Fanonism, Césairean vanguardism, and anti-Black feminist thought. San Juan argues that this approach to Fanonian thought offers a fruitful engagement with cultural studies that can both engage in an analysis of the structures of colonialism and the everyday realm of cultural and rhetorical practices. In this sense, the revolutionary humanist form of Fanonism takes the insights of the other interlocking forms in order to create a more nuanced vision of Fanon’s new humanism.

“A Program of Complete Disorder”: A Black Iconoclastic Reading of Fanon’s New Humanism and *Tabula Rasa*

Fanon argues that the ultimate goal of his work is a radical break from the status quo which he describes as a “new humanism,” a goal that, though clear enough at first glance, has been debated by scholars for decades.³⁸ While the revolutionary humanist perspective is perhaps the most popular form of Fanonism in our current moment, it has been engaged in a debate with the emergent afropessimist perspective on Fanon. What remains disputed is how one defines the human and how a new humanism differs from Western Man. What tools does Fanon offer us for reaching this new humanism? Building on Rabaka and Marriott, I want to more specifically examine this debate as I suspect that a Black iconoclastic reading, like afropessimism, may be subject to rigorous critique and contestation from those who take up a revolutionary humanist form of Fanonism. While afropessimist thinkers articulate an anti-humanist understanding of Fanon and privilege the specificity of anti-Blackness, revolutionary humanist Fanonists such as Thomas and Olaloku-Teriba have launched critiques at afropessimism for a perceived misinterpretation of Fanon’s corpus. They argue that Wilderson and Sexton’s afropessimist interpretations of Fanon’s scholarship are decontextualized and produce a grid politics that reifies the categories of Western Man as monolithic and ontological.³⁹ Mbembe similarly cautions us from internalizing Blackness as abjection because it destroys the possibility of accessing a new kind of humanity.⁴⁰ There are two warrants to their argument: for these scholars, afropessimism concedes that humanity belongs to Western Man and afropessimism produces an unnecessary divide between non-Black colonized people and Black people. Thomas and Olaloku-Teriba ultimately conclude that this grid politics creates a perverse interpretation of scholars like Fanon and Wynter that naturalizes a de-contextualized, academic, and neoliberal identity politics that ultimately serves colonialism.⁴¹ Indeed, from the perspective of this revolutionary humanist interpretation of Fanon, afropessimism destroys the potential for anticolonial revolution and might even be reminiscent of Gates’s critical Fanonism.

The afropessimist response, however, indicates that there is a hidden violence in approaching coalitions through the lens of a shared victimization at the hands of white people or the colonizer. Instead, Sexton argues that we must reject this “people-of-color-blindness” in favor of theorizing the color line as Black versus non-Black.⁴² From the afropessimist perspective, revolutionary humanist Fanonism risks eliding the specificity of anti-Blackness and concealing the role that non-Black colonized people play in perpetuating it, in favor of emphasizing a common cause. Thus, for scholars like Sexton and Wilderson it is possible for the colonized to demand the end of colonialism while reproducing a new manifestation of anti-Blackness once they’ve achieved their proper status in the world. That is not to say that an analysis of colonialism or other forms of oppression aren’t important and can’t be reconciled with an afropessimist view, but instead to demonstrate the importance of analyzing how even the most marginalized non-Black people have the capacity to wield anti-Blackness as a means of securing their own narrative of redemption.

Moreover, afropessimism refuses the redemptive telos represented by the counter-icon of an alternative humanity. Marriott’s *Whither Fanon* offers a different snapshot of Fanonian thought, outlining two dominant forms of Fanonism that he seeks to unsettle. The first

camp, the Marxist-phenomenological tradition which Marriott engages through Gordon and Ato Sekyi-Otu, considers Blackness through an existentialist lens that privileges a focus on experience, staging a kind of struggle between the violence of the anti-Black world and the alterity of Black existence. The revolutionary humanist form of Fanonism might be considered as emerging from this Marxist-phenomenological tradition insofar as it shares the same kind of existentialist philosophy and dialectical humanism present within the scholarship of Gordon and Sekyi-Otu. The second camp, which Marriott engages through David Scott and Mbembe, builds on the Marxist-phenomenological tradition while offering a more pointed analysis of how one can move beyond an analysis of lived experience to consider the best ways to foment postcolonial resistance. Marriott challenges the revolutionary humanist perspective by returning us to Fanon's concept of *tabula rasa* which refers to a complete and utter suspension of all teleological narratives we have been ritually habituated into accepting as our destiny.⁴³ Building on afropessimist scholars such as Wilderson and Sexton, Marriott argues that we must also be careful not to convert Fanon's new humanism into another teleology. For Marriott, Fanon's search for a "new humanism" is not the search for a literal roadmap to an alternative humanity, but instead a search for something that exceeds the limits of imagination within an anti-Black world.⁴⁴ Thus, Marriott's critique raises questions about whether the revolutionary humanist perspective might represent yet another counter-icon worthy of veneration.

Marriott uses an emphasis on the psychoanalytic elements of Fanonian thought to bolster his criticism of a teleological narrative of revolutionary humanism. For him, all of Fanon's political writings are an extension of his clinical work and his wrestling with psychoanalysis more broadly. *Whither Fanon* is thus characterized by an in-depth analysis of Fanon's clinical practice and his relationship to Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to more fully explicate how Fanon's theorizing of the vertigo that characterizes the lived experience of Blackness as a kind of index of the Real.⁴⁵ In the Fanonian sense, the Symbolic might be understood as being a broad iconographic vocabulary grounded in a species division between Black skin and white masks, the Imaginary as representing how each subject attempts to wield this iconography as a means of gaining admittance into the culture of the white mask, and the Real as the fissures and anxieties that emerge in the Symbolic when it is revealed that one's white mask cannot cover over their Black skin. Ultimately, Marriott contends that Fanon's examination of Black vertigo reveals a larger concern with grasping how negrophobia "forms an index of affect, or semblance, that brings with it an anguish-laden atmosphere," and how that atmosphere is essential to the smooth operation of the white mask.⁴⁶ In this sense, despite the invaluable contributions these scholars offer to a study of Fanonian thought, Marriott's critique of this teleology might be applied to scholars like Rabaka, Gordon, Thomas, Olaloku-Teriba, and more who understand of Fanon as giving us a map to an alternative humanity. This desire for a systematic path toward an alternative humanity is an anti-Fanonian pursuit of a Bible of decolonization. Similar to Césaire, the iconoclastic spirit of revolutionary humanist Fanonism is subverted in favor of a new redemptive telos. Building on Marriott, I argue that there is a Black iconoclasm within Fanonian thought evidenced by this concept of *tabula rasa* that cannot be reduced to a variety of humanisms. Reading Fanon as engaging in Black iconoclasm disassembles the cyclical relationship between iconoclasm and icon creation that Taussig correctly highlights insofar as Fanon refuses to produce a formula for Black liberation. Instead, a Black iconoclastic interpretation of Fanon is broadly invested in a complete questioning and reversal of colonialism where "the last shall be first and the first last."⁴⁷

A Black iconoclastic reading of Fanon via afropessimism begins from a demand for the end of the anti-Black world through a ritual shattering of its icons. To parse out what this

means, let us return to a passage from Fanon himself:

La décolonisation, qui se propose de changer l'ordre du monde, est, on le voit, un programme de désordre absolu.⁴⁸

This passage from Fanon's *Les Damnés de La Terre* concerning the process of decolonization is where the title of this essay originates, although the original French has been interpreted differently by the two popular English translations. In the version by Richard Philcox, the sentence is translated as "decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder."⁴⁹ In the version by Constance Farrington, the phrase is translated "decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder."⁵⁰ Whereas Philcox uses the phrase "agenda of total disorder" and Farrington uses the phrase "a program of complete disorder," the French phrase "*un programme de désordre absolu*" might also be understood as a reference to Georg Hegel's notion of "the Absolute" offering yet another perspective on how to interpret this passage. For Hegel, the Absolute represents the unconditional ground of a self-conscious and self-thinking infinite subject or Being. Operating as the sum of all human relation and potentiality, Hegel frames his discussion of dialectics in context of this self-referential and independent totality.

In considering the use of the term *absolu* in the original French version of *Les Damnés de La Terre*, one might consider how this *programme de désordre* relates to Fanon's larger adjustment of Hegel's approach to the lordship/bondage dialectic through the lens of a racialized colonialism.⁵¹ As Adebayo Ogungbure explains, Hegel explicitly framed the Negro as exhibiting the wild and untamed natural man who had not come to develop "the knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self."⁵² Fanon adjusts Hegel to more fully consider how the dialectical relationship between Black skin and white masks is absolutely grounded by the expulsion of Blackness into what Fanon calls a zone of non-being. The use of *absolu* hints at how Fanon's idea of decolonization is only attainable through an infinite process of negation that seeks to pull the rug (the Absolute) out from under the white mask until the entire affective atmosphere of negrophobia is fully shattered. While I personally prefer Farrington's "program of complete disorder," I am by no means trying to assert this translation as more accurate than Philcox's "agenda of total disorder." Instead, I want to hold these three different versions of the passage in tension as a way of disordering the range of meanings that are being derived from it. Regardless of the differences in exact phrasing, all three versions of this passage point to what I call a Black iconoclastic approach to the struggle for Black liberation. In fact, one might push back against the reading of the French "*qui se propose de changer*" into the English "sets out" which both Philcox and Farrington's translations share. Rather than "setting out," which assumes a clear destination or telos that one is pursuing through decolonization, reading this phrase differently as "decolonization, *which proposes to change* the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder," might instead uniquely reflect Fanon's desire to have a complex sitting with the question of decolonization in a broad ritual fashion rather than the establishment of a stringent and methodical "program" to be followed.

It is in this context that Wilderson argues that the afropessimist project takes up Fanon's call: through a refusal to affirm and a taking up of Blackness not as a positive value but as the point of absolute dereliction within the Real.⁵³ Wilderson refuses to offer a positive value to Blackness because he recognizes how that positive value would be taken up within the anti-Black Symbolic and Imaginary. For Wilderson, the demand of the Black

slave is "too iconoclastic" for our current imaginations, including even the most radical leftist theories.⁵⁴ Sexton concurs in his landmark piece "Ante-Anti-Blackness," "The most radical negation of the anti-black world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world."⁵⁵ Following this, Fanon's declaration that what is required is an *absolu* destruction of the white mask is the embrace of a Black iconoclasm that refuses the icons of whiteness in favor of something that must be invented. In the introduction of *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon writes that his hope is to liberate Black people from the desire for whiteness, to liberate us from our own investment in attaining some sort of status in the white world.⁵⁶ He argues that he does not bring timeless truths to us, and that "in no fashion should [we] undertake to prepare the world that will come later. [We] belong irreducibly to [our] time."⁵⁷ In this sense, Fanon is attempting to dis-cohere the teleological narrative through which Black people perform rituals that get them closer and closer to whiteness. He explicitly refuses to offer new humanism as an iconic image of a salvation that we can conceptualize, but rather posits new humanism as the radically unwritten result of a ritual orientation toward the shattering of any telos that is prescribed as the cure for Black suffering.

Rather than charting out a path toward a new world initiated by an alternative humanity, a Black iconoclastic reading of Fanon interprets his call for a program of complete disorder as a call for the end of the world. As previously discussed, one might argue that stating the world must end is itself a telos thus confounding my argument. However, when Fanon speaks of telos, he doesn't mean that you cannot strive toward decolonization. He clearly states that the aims of his projects are to end the status quo through an antagonistic struggle. The critical distinction is this: just because one knows the world must end does not mean they must profess to have secret knowledge of the formula for the new world that would redeem us. Tapping into the Black iconoclasm within Fanonian thought, Wilderson explains that we must reject that second move toward a narrative of redemption; for him, Black people are categorically barred from narrative arcs in order to stabilize this path toward redemption for the non-Black human.⁵⁸ It is in this context that afropessimist scholars argue that the only option is to produce a complete and utter suspension of these narrative arcs of redemption through a constant Fanonian proposal for the end of the world as we know it. As Marriott explains, this is also reflected in Fanon's clinical practice of *socialtherapie* which he argued could not offer a systematic path to making one's psyche whole again, but instead a process by which one could deduce and rupture the phantasms that lay at the heart of the individual's ego, the clinic, and the anti-Black society in which both the patient and analyst found themselves situated.⁵⁹ Thus, I argue that the afropessimist demand for the end of the world in conjunction with Fanon's argument that the process of decolonization is a complete program of disorder inaugurates a *tabula rasa*. Indeed, neither Black iconoclasm nor afropessimism are decontextualizing Fanonian thought; it is instead a meta-commentary that cautions readers of Fanon to consider how the solutions to Black abjection that they offer might also reproduce the teleological narratives that he rallied against.

Black Iconoclasm: The Ritual Practice of Negation as Invention

The crucial issue at stake in the debate between the revolutionary humanist and afropessimist interpretation of Fanon is about how to best unsettle the anti-Black cosmos

through a shattering of its icons. Each camp accuses the other of falling victim to this violent iconography; revolutionary humanists accuse the afropessimists of lifting up the categories of, and conceding humanity to, Western Man. Afropessimists accuse revolutionary humanists of producing a new counter-icon of an alternative humanity that will supposedly produce a new world free from anti-Blackness. This critique harkens back to Fanon's critique of Césaire's *Negritude* which seeks to imagine a mythical Black world that can rival Europe. This is why I frame revolutionary humanist Fanonism as an iconoclastic project that ultimately relinquishes the power of chaos and negativity in what is ultimately an anti-Fanonian pursuit of a redemptive telos. The afropessimist approach emphasizes Fanon's *tabula rasa* and program of complete disorder in their desire for the end of the world. This raises its own set of questions: namely, how does one pursue a Fanonian program of complete disorder or the afropessimist pursuit of the end of the world? Fanon's choice of words seems particularly contradictory; after all, how does one engage in a program if the hope is to completely disorder? How does one engage in rituals of chaos?

As I've explored, one of the major critiques of afropessimism made by revolutionary humanists is that it is more descriptive than prescriptive. Wilderson's perspective, which views afropessimism as a meta-theory that unsettles the redemption narratives established by humanist theories of liberation, has faced particular criticism for how it demands the end of the world without offering a method for doing so.⁶⁰ Other afropessimist scholars like Sexton have gotten close to discussing how this meta-theory results in a psycho-political imperative to embrace pathology and "to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death" despite how counter-intuitive it may seem.⁶¹ This gets us closer to thinking about the realm of everyday practice insofar as Sexton starts to carve out an understanding of negation as an everyday ritual practice of antagonism and refusal against the dictates of the anti-Black world. Moreover, Sexton importantly considers this practice of negation as being generative of Black social life and perhaps holding the key to Fanonian invention. Yet, questions still remain concerning how one engages in this active embrace of Black pathology.

Afropessimism, and by extension Black iconoclasm, finds itself in the weird position of believing that this anti-Black world can end via *absolu* antagonism while also refusing to entertain any strict method to engaging in such antagonism and any redemptive telos about what comes after this world ends. This is evident in the debates that have occurred between afropessimism, Warren's Black nihilism, and Moten's Black mysticism. Sexton critiques Warren's Black nihilism by arguing that the conclusion of *Ontological Terror* risks reducing the project of Black nihilism to enduring anti-Blackness as opposed to trying to end it. As Sexton notes, this contention that we can *only* endure identifies a distinction between Black nihilism and afropessimism.⁶² It is not that endurance is wrong or bad, but it is to forget the fact that negation produces a space for invention. While I refuse to offer what we will invent, a Black iconoclastic reading of Fanon would also refuse a teleological narrative that forecloses the possibility of that invention. That is to say, the Black spirit does not simply resist as separate and outside of the socio-political field of anti-Blackness as a vehicle of endurance. Rather, a program of complete disorder is committed to an *absolu* undoing of the anti-Black colony.

If afropessimism cannot be reduced to endurance, then the question again becomes how *do* we engage in a project of ending the world? If, as Fanon argues, decolonization is a program of complete disorder, Moten argues this "leads, without much turning, to the

question of what a *program* of complete disorder would be. In any case it is difficult to see how . . . the negation that is always already negated would carry out such a program.”⁶³ In this reading, Fanon via afropessimism privileges the dictates of the anti-Black world and is “brutally cut off” in regard to paying attention to the “irreducible presence” of Black sociality.⁶⁴ While Moten similarly rejects revolutionary humanism, he is trying to assert that there is a way to embrace Black sociality that both rejects afropessimism’s refusal to affirm and the counter-icon of revolutionary humanism. In considering the risk of producing a counter-icon through his embracement of Black sociality, Moten uses the metaphor of a “subprime debtor” who takes a huge, seemingly irrational, risk on something they will probably never be able to repay the debt on.⁶⁵ In this metaphor, Black sociality is a radical undercommons that he is betting on even if it risks bearing the brunt of the critique that Fanon via afropessimism has launched of producing systematic blueprints of Black revolution in their emphasis on *tabula rasa*. For Moten, this is the Black radical tradition of “making a way out of no way (out)” whether it seems “stupid” to others or not.⁶⁶ However, Moten’s Black mysticism has garnered responses from afropessimists like Sexton and Marriott.

Afropessimism responds to Moten’s criticism by arguing that there is no disavowal of Black sociality anywhere in their meta-theory or the scholarship of Fanon. It is not that afropessimism doesn’t care about Black sociality; rather, there is a deep recognition that any attempt to map out what that Black sociality is will inevitably fail because our current imagination remains too constrained by the iconography of the anti-Black cosmos. As Sexton explains,

Afro-pessimism-in-practice, or a practical or practiced afro-pessimism, may seem a contradiction in terms; afro-pessimism, it seems, is necessary to think with and impossible to do. You can only do something about it. It doesn’t matter really, since the praxis, the theory-informed practice, is happening anyway, all around us, all about us. We just don’t know anything about it, and *as soon as we make the attempt to produce such knowledge, it slips our grasp*, despite our best intentions .⁶⁷

Whereas Moten locates a positive mapping of Black sociality as being generative for invention, afropessimism responds that such mapping results in the stifling of Fanonian invention in favor of replicating already existing methods of Black fugitivity. In that sense, the afropessimist is not the regulator of the subprime debtor; instead, it seems that it is Moten who is unsatisfied with the call for a program of complete disorder precisely because it relies on making a way out of a chaotic *no way*. More to the point, Moten disavows the generative capacity of negation in his search of a positive conception of Black sociality viewing it instead as stopping at a totalizing description of Blackness. He declares that “the hold [of the slave ship] is no *via negativa*” but instead a “distressed circuitry” without ever considering how it is negation and chaos that shocks the anti-Black cosmos and initiates this inventive circuitry.⁶⁸ In offering the Black fugitive, the mystic refuses to sit with their lack of knowledge about whatever new Black sociality might form in a world beyond anti-Blackness. Rather than embracing this mystical approach to the search for a Bible of decolonization, the Black iconoclast chooses to dwell within the *no way* of disorder.

Black iconoclasm takes up afropessimism as a meta-commentary to think through a ritual process that habitually intervenes in that critical juncture between the making and breaking of icons within an anti-Black cosmos. Black iconoclasm cannot be seen as a singular event in which we diagnose the unethicity of the anti-Black world, shatter some

icons, and subsequently move on to the work of building a new Black world. Instead, it means committing oneself to a persistent tracking of this cyclical relationship to consider how one shatters the dialectic itself not as synthesis but as an *absolu* dismantling of the very terms grounding the antagonism between white and Black. It means considering how even some of those most radical visions of a new Black world threatens that project of dismantling. Black feminist thinker Sharpe's concept of wake work is important for thinking about afropessimism-in-practice. Rather than offering us a redemptive telos, wake work is a process of undisciplining that begins with thinking and acting from the hold of the slave ship and meditating on the "total climate of anti-Blackness."⁶⁹ Particularly important is that wake work does not require that we engage in one particular ritual over and over again; instead, it is a broad program that is rooted in the negation of the slave ship. Wake work might look like mourning, tracking the movements of the slave ship, or even waking up in the sense of activating one's consciousness.⁷⁰ It is all of these things and yet not reducible to any one of them. Perhaps the most important aspect of Sharpe's concept of wake work as it relates to Fanonian invention is that the metaphor of the hold freely acknowledges that we don't yet know where the ship is taking us. Similarly, Black iconoclasm is rooted in the humble understanding that we cannot fully grasp the pervasiveness of this anti-Black cosmos nor what possibilities might lie beyond it. From our position only one thing is clear, there can be no salvation in an anti-Black world.

Black iconoclasm requires that we move beyond description and diagnosis but that we also refuse teleological prescription; instead, it means dedicating oneself to an *absolu* process of negation and chaos, remaining within this radical suspension of telos, never satisfied with your pursuit of *tabula rasa*. Black iconoclasm should be thought of as an imperfect and contextual ritual mode of chaos that places the afropessimist demand for the end of the world in the realm of everyday practice through the antagonizing of icons within the anti-Black cosmos and the refusal of all teleological redemption narratives. This ritual orientation toward chaos, just as wake work, might look different according to the rhetorical situation but still offers a broad program of complete disorder where invention might exist. Whereas one might read Wilderson's imperative for an "unflinching paradigmatic analysis" as a call for rigid perfection, Black iconoclasm reads this statement in precisely the opposite register.⁷¹ Instead, it is a reminder that this is an endless pursuit, riddled with failures, and requires a humble approach to both Fanon's corpus and the struggle for Black liberation writ large. The ritual commitment to Black iconoclasm calls into question the emergence of narratives concerning Black liberation and a progressive future, whatever the source, by linking them to a larger cosmology of anti-Black violence. As Marriott explains, Fanon was extremely skeptical of the "ruse of a black world." Marriott continues, "if one believes that this world only exists as possibility (a thought forever enclosed by anti-blackness), then *any claim to know it must be fraudulent*."⁷² In this sense, there is no way to create a replicable model of Black iconoclasm, because it requires attention to the specific and contingent manifestations of emerging icons in an anti-Black cosmos. It is an unflinching reminder that at the exact moment you have fallen in love with a map to a Black world you have found yourself worshipping a new icon in need of disordering. In the spirit of Fanon, we must take a leap toward the unknown, fully embrace the fall, think from that chaotic no-place or what Fanon calls "*n'est pas*," and traverse the erratic yet inventive trajectories that iconoclasm generates.⁷³

Chaotic Conclusion(s)


Over the course of this essay, I have examined popular forms of Fanonism that both demonstrate Fanon's importance to the field of Black and cultural studies but also highlight an ongoing dispute amongst scholars about who has the proper interpretation of his corpus. Whether one is in favor of antiracist, decolonialist, critical, Marxist, feminist, revolutionary humanist, or afropessimist Fanonism there is a common investment in iconoclastically smashing the anti-Black cosmos. What remains contested is the best approach to harnessing the potential of what Fanon calls new humanism. This essay shows that far from simply smashing the icon of the white mask, Fanon similarly cautioned scholars against the creation of new alternative icons of redemption that calcify their own teleological narrative. For Fanon, it is not the particular icon that is the problem, but the form of iconography that underlies, and has thus constrained, our political imagination. Drawing on afropessimist thought, this essay challenges the revolutionary humanist perspective as risking the creation of a new icon of an alternative revolutionary humanism that stifles true Fanonian invention. It is for this reason that Fanon launches a blistering criticism of his close friend and contemporary Aimé Césaire's celebration of cultural nationalism and vanguardism, decrying it as a nauseating mimicry of European values.



























Turning to an examination of the afropessimist turn in Fanonist study, I analyze intramural debates between Wilderson, Sexton, Warren, and Moten as it relates to the Fanonian concept of invention. Whereas Warren argues negation aids endurance in an anti-Black world, and Moten argues Fanon via afropessimism's focus on negation brutally cuts off a focus on the inventiveness of Black fugitive sociality, I explicate the Black iconoclasm that resides within Fanon via afropessimism's approach to the process of decolonization as an *absolu* and perhaps infinite ritual process of negation that seeks to completely dismantle the anti-Black cosmos and take a leap toward something new and unimaginable. It is this ritual orientation toward chaos that initiates Fanon's *tabula rasa*, a space cleared of *a priori* values and ripe for invention. How does one engage in Black iconoclasm? How do we reconcile the tension between the concepts of ritual and chaos? How does one work toward the end of the world without reproducing new icons? I do not have neat answers. We must recognize the ineffability of Black liberation and the need to operate within that suspension of telos. Yet, this recognition need not result in a neoliberal celebration of cultural hybridity that Gates's critical Fanonism has been accused of. Indeed, Black iconoclasm is driven by the pursuit of decolonization and afropessimist theory that Gates would probably deem too grand and universal for his liking. Instead, this essay attempts to place afropessimist concepts such as ending the world, embracing pathology, into the realm of practice.

Black iconoclasm is a constant reminder that every single time you believe yourself to have found the systematic path to Black liberation it is probably time to reflect on your potential creation of a redemptive telos. To engage in Black iconoclasm means to dedicate oneself to an *absolu* process of negation and chaos, remaining within this radical suspension of telos, never satisfied with your pursuit of *tabula rasa*. Following cultural theorist Louis M. Maraj, we might think of this ritual commitment toward ending the world as a process of anti-humanist "Black rhetorical reclamation" which, far from attempting to gain recognition from white institutions, "culls Black histories, temporalities, languages, and literacies as Black invention."⁷⁴ Just as Fanon, I do not offer timeless truths and so I fully recognize and embrace the potential failures of my own theorizations. I believe that this kind of humble approach to Black liberation is absolutely necessary. In that spirit, I invite the reader to disorder my own potential pursuit of a redemptive telos just as I have sought to unsettle other forms of Fanonism. I invite you to invent *via negativa*.

Notes

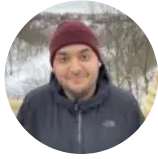
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